BOOK REVIEW

***Connecting Social Problems and Popular Culture: Why Media is Not the Answer*, Second Edition, by Karen Sternheimer. Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2013, 320 pages, $37.00 Paper. ISBN: 9780813347233.**

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In *Connecting Social Problems with Popular Culture*, University of Southern California sociologist Karen Sternheimer argues that our often media-inspired tendency to demonize pop culture draws attention and problem-solving efforts away from the economic disparities that are the true foundation of our nation's challenges.

Countering the taken-for-granted or seldom-questioned bits of misinformation that have come to inform commonplace American opinions on violence, sex, education and the perceived loss of childhood innocence, Sternheimer weaves a constructivist argument that combines fresh and incisive logic with smart debunking of media misrepresentations. Emphasizing how news items cherry-picked for commercial impact are no match for a nuanced understanding of the structural, economic and historical fabric of our society, she tackles concerns about television, video games, education, promiscuity, materialism, body image, drugs and more in a few short and extremely engaging chapters. With reference to sociologist Barry Glassner, author of *The Culture of Fear*, Sternheimer seconds the idea of a "social sleight of hand" whereby our media-driven fixation on popular culture as the root of social problems is instead a distraction that deflects our gaze from the deeper structural and economic issues.

To the complaint handed down from one generation of elders to the next that popular culture corrupts the young, Sternheimer

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responds with a call for a more rational view of history, pointing out that much of this anxiety is rooted in an overly romanticized idea of childhoods past. Since the agricultural era, the Industrial Revolution, and the subsequent rise of compulsory education, parents and kids have spent fewer and fewer hours of the day in side-by-side activities. Kids' days are now passed more safely at school, rather than the factory or farm, but the reduced face-time between parents and children foments concerns that we, as parents, are not fully in control of shaping their fledgling values and that their innocence lies open to predatory media and commercial interests. Sternheimer questions whether the definitions of childhood behind these fears are really very functional, though. "The idea that childhood in the past was composed of carefree days without worry is a conveniently reconstructed version of history. This fantasy allows adults to feel nostalgia for a lost idealized past that never was," she writes, adding that the American obsession with the idea of childhood innocence "serves adult needs and reinforces adult power rather than best meeting the needs of young people" (p. 26).

To the common complaint that pop culture's barrage of screen-based violence is destroying the safety of our communities, Sternheimer presents a series of arguments that casts a glaring light on the degree to which statistics and academic research are often recklessly misrepresented in news broadcasts and print journalism. She notes that it is interesting, for example, that in spite of rising trends in on-screen violence, total homicide rates have dropped from 9.3 per 100,000 to 4.8 per 100,000 over the last 20 years, while rates for children, which were already much lower to begin with, have dropped even more sharply. Although responsible for far less violent crime than adults, kids receive much more media coverage for it, Sternheimer argues, referencing a Berkeley Media Studies Group finding that half of news stories about youth focused on violence (p. 107).

Elaborating further here and bringing in some of her own qualitative work, Sternheimer tells of her past research as part of a team exploring causes of violence among youth from a Los Angeles neighborhood heavy in gang activity. The team found that the kids who dealt with real violence as a part of their everyday existence did not find much in media violence to take seriously.

"Many described media violence as gorier, with over-the-top special effects," she writes (p. 129). What they did report, however, was that watching the violence made them more fearful about the dangers in their own neighborhoods and Sternheimer concludes, "We can't honestly address media violence until we recognize that, in part, our media culture is violent because we, as a society, are" (p. 132).

Again the underlying problem here is not youth culture but the poverty and inequality that are ignored in the course of our media-fabricated distractions, Sternheimer says. Another example is the story of twelve-year-old Lionel Tate who beat to death a six-year-old girl and later made headlines with a lawyer who attempted to explain the death as an accident resulting from Tate's enthusiasm for televised wrestling. But, according to reports from neighbors, a former teacher and a forensic psychologist, Tate already had a long history of trouble with violence, drugs and anger management. The defense did not pass jury scrutiny, and Tate did spend time in jail, but to this uncommon tale of an actual youth murder case, Sternheimer points out that "completely lost in the discussion surrounding this case is our repeated failure as a society to treat children like Lionel *before* violent behavior escalates" (p. 113, italics original).

Another common area of concern is the widespread idea that popular culture is driving a "dumbing down" of American youth and a ramping up of materialism and greed. In a chapter exploring commercialism and education, Sternheimer points to the case of a San Diego calculus teacher who sold advertising space on his exams after state budget cuts left him without enough money to print the number of worksheets he felt his students needed to succeed. In addition to budget cuts and their impacts on kids and schools, Sternheimer notes that communities offering tax breaks to try to attract new businesses may also be dangerously undermining the tax base that funds local public education. Referring to the relatively new trend placing ads in schools and at school events, she writes, "The sad fact is that advertisers often value children as consumers more than our society values them as students, and advertisers are fronting the money to prove it" (p. 263). This argument, as well as Sternheimer's elaboration of the history of urban flight and the real estate redlining practices that have left

many districts still struggling today, bestows a deep structural and economic understanding of the rationale behind those ads in the schools and other efforts just to make ends meet.

In *Connecting Social Problems with Popular Culture*, Sternheimer commandeers a topic near and dear to many college-age readers to open a creative lens for the exploration of social problems in the United States. Books such as this one, which begin by asserting a devil's advocate position, have to be out of the gate and running with a solid defense from page one. Sternheimer crafts it expertly, offering insightful questions and rapid-fire evidence to hook her audience at the outset of each chapter then elaborating with solid research findings and creative argumentation. Time and again, she concludes each chapter by illustrating the larger point that we are allowing media-fueled fear of pop culture to deflect our attention from the real social problems that spring from economic disparities. With a lively perspective that promises to ignite critical thinking in student readers—and possibly their parents, too—Sternheimer's work delivers a multi-faceted exploration of structure and agency under the influence of commercialism and media. Her book would make an outstanding addition to a wide range of undergraduate sociology courses.